

# **Online Communities of Practice and their Role in the Professional Development of Teachers**

by

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## **Abstract**

Teachers are required to constantly change their pedagogy throughout their career, either in response to new theoretical approaches or new technological innovations. It is a profession that is characterised by dynamism and constantly strives to advance its practices to improve outcomes in student learning. However, current professional development programs are seen to be failing to meet the needs of the teachers, students and education policy.

Research has shown (Huberman, 1995; Richardson, 1990), there has been little discernible change in teaching practice from current professional development programs, thus an alternative solution is needed. The premise underlying this study is that the use of online communities of practice may present a solution to the failure of current professional development programs in effecting change to teaching practice. Thus it is the intention of this thesis to investigate if online communities of practice can realise this potential.

The research was conducted within the paradigm of qualitative analysis. The study was conducted as a multiple explanatory case study also known as a collective case study (Yin, 2003) and this approach reflects the current shift in trends of research in education. As Richardson (1994) stated, it has shifted “from a focus on effective behaviours toward

the hermeneutic purpose of understanding how teachers make sense of teaching and learning” (p. 5). The approach used in this thesis provided insights into the value of online communities as authentic contexts for supporting professional development particularly in relation to relationships, communication and collaboration between teachers around professional inquiry, problem solving and emotional aspects of teaching.

The results of the study show that online communities of practice are a valuable source of continuous professional development for teachers. They have the ability to provide support as teachers accommodate the constant changes and the need to acquire new skills and knowledge. The strength of this method of PD lies in its ability to be self-sustaining and generative. Teachers have access to authentic, relevant and flexible learning that is not constrained by time and can be accessed according to members needs.

## Abbreviations

The abbreviations used in the thesis are explicated in full (in first usage) and can generally be determined from the text in which the abbreviation appears. The following list of standard abbreviations appears within the text and are set out below for clarity.

### *Abbreviation*

ICT	Information and Communications Technology
CMC	Computer-mediated Communication
CoP	Community of Practice
Online CoP	Online Community of Practice
PD	Professional Development
BECTA	British Educational Communications and Technology Agency
SSABSA	Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia

Australian states and territories are abbreviated in the text using standard abbreviations such as Qld (Queensland), SA (South Australia), and the standard abbreviate UK (United Kingdom) is also used.

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## Statement of Original Authorship

*The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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*This thesis is dedicated to Kaye and Bob Howell.*